



History of Irish Studio Ceramics - Hidden Treasures of Museum Collections.

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The Hidden Treasures of Museum Collections: Hand Crafted Objects and their contemporary contribution

Secreted throughout the collections of the National Museums of Ireland are 20th and 21st Century craft objects, in ceramics glass and metals to encounter. Some are functional, to eat off, drink from, cut, dig, carve, adorn or hammer, some are celebratory, commemorative, humorous, or poignant. This paper proposes to explore these objects and ask what is their significance today? Are they merely historical reminders or do they still contribute to our culture, our knowledge and our identities. The paper will reflect the events these objects have lived through, how they have passed through many hands over many generations and how these generations have actually transformed these objects over time. Finally the paper will explore what these objects represent in a contemporary context, as metaphors of societal value in visual and material culture.

This paper will look at a collection of objects that connect Craft to a number of broader issues. Industrialization for one, national identity and political struggle another and also cultural revival. This paper will attempt to make clear the wider values these object have while still celebrating the aesthetic and functional qualities I propose they continue to maintain.

The Pot for industrial change.

We begin with the John ffrench plate and bowl set from 1969, which was made in The Arklow Pottery in Co. Wexford, Ireland (1). Although made in the industrial context of a function pottery manufacturer that ran from 1934-99, within Arklow Pottery was Arklow 'Studio' Pottery. This in essence was the practice of locating artists within industrial manufacturers as practiced by Scandinavian Ceramic and Porcelain Producers such as Arabia in Helsinki, Finland.

To this day Arabia locates a number of artist's studios within it Factory. The 'Design Report' of 1962, commissioned by the Irish Ministry for Trade and Enterprise would have supported and promoted this model of collaboration between art and industry (2). The report will be considered later.

1 <http://www.studiopottery.com/cgi-bin/mp.cgi?item=223>

2 http://books.google.ie/books?id=SmX7CIYVUlwC&pg=PT263&lpg=PT263&dq=the+scandinavian+design+report+1962&source=bl&ots=LflQnmwTCx&sig=XblHDS3Gbh2oD6lJBIB8wA6V_8Y&hl=en&sa=X&ei=Z0OPUZPAOs7n7AaqslBY&redir_esc=y



John ffrench plate and single stem bowl, 1969

Let us examine the object: a hand painted dish, with a centrally located single stem bowl which is standing in the centre of the circular dish. Loops of cobalt blue colour decorate the under glazed surface with spots of copper green within the loops.

Ffrench (1928-2010) (3) was known for highly colourful studio ceramics throughout his career and there is a degree of vibrancy in his piece but not to the degree of his studio work of later years. His flamboyant signature and dating on the underside of the plate is perhaps its most spontaneous display.

3 <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/berkshire/obituary.aspx?n=john-ffrench&pid=138954803#fbLoggedOut>



John ffrench signature 1969



Detail, John ffrench plate, 1969

Some context of ffrench's contribution to Irish Ceramics in terms of education, aesthetic and positioning in relation to material culture should be considered. ffrench was one of the three pioneers of Studio Ceramics in Ireland in the twentieth century. ffrench is responsible for establishing the first studio pottery in Ireland when invited to join Ring Ceramic Studios in Kilkenny by another potter, Peter Brennan. Until his demise in 2010 ffrench generated a consistent body or studio practice of critically high regard.



John ffrench ceramics

But let us consider this piece of ceramics from 1969 through a different lens. What else is this piece saying? What else does it demonstrate? In the historical and political context it demonstrates a determined drive by the Irish Government at the time, and the Ministry of Trade and Enterprise, (Coras Tractala) in particular, to improve the industrial design standards of a nation emerging from a colonial past, and seeking to face the future by recognizing design excellence within a European (and in this case Scandinavian) context.

The French piece demonstrates the Ministry's recognition of a successful industrial model of collaboration between art and industry and its intention to test that model in Ireland. This will be expanded upon later in this paper.



John French

The subversive or political pot

Testament to political initiative is not the only hidden attribute the craft object can imbue. Consider the 'Home Rule' teapot.



Home Rule Teapot 1888

Probably made in Scotland in the 1880's (the museum descriptor says no more) it is unclear on which side of the Irish Sea it lived its domestic life. Regardless of its location it is a provocative piece considering it is

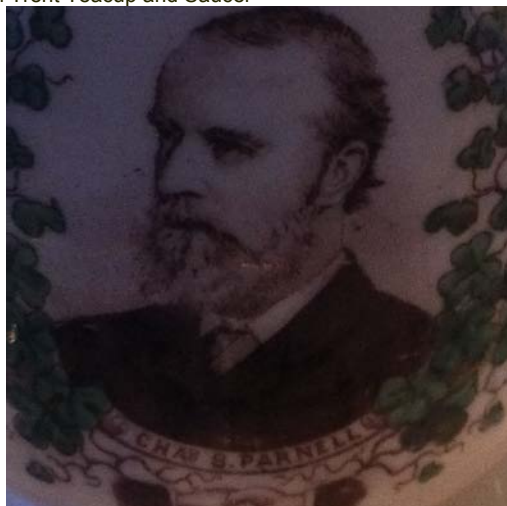
dated only 26 years before the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 and 32 years before Irish Independence. In the global context I propose that this is evidence of the subversive nature of craft, where particular agenda's, often political, are secreted into various societies, often undetected by governments and judiciaries.

Consider the 'Erin go Brach' table service. From a colonial and emancipative perspective, it is unusual that these plates defining a drive for a new Ireland were made in England; Stoke on Trent in fact, the home of Industrial Pottery and Porcelain manufacture in the United Kingdom since the industrial revolution. This table setting hardly proposes unity.

One example from the range is the Charles Stewart Parnell teacup. Parnell (1846-81) was an Irish Nationalist, a political leader and a land reform activist. The teacup and saucer are standard slip cast saucer and handled cup of generic aesthetic for the period, its proportions and finishing are refined. Broadly over both cup and saucer are wreaths of Shamrock, a symbol of Ireland, used by St. Patrick to define the Catholic Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost.



Stoke on Trent Teacup and Saucer



However within one shamrock cluster on the saucer a round tower is evident, harking back to pre reformation Christianity when villagers would run to the round towers built by Christian monks to seek refuge from Viking invaders. So perhaps now we are not seeing just a papist perspective on religion but a broader Christian one. This I would argue is significant as in reality not all division in 19th and 20th century Ireland was based on a catholic/protestant divide.

Opposite the round tower is the Irish Harp, the symbol of Hibernia, Britannia's helpless younger sister. Perhaps not the ideal symbol for an emerging nation driving a nationalist republican agenda but it has a direct link to Parnell as he used the image in his newspaper 'The United Irishman', (4) There is also strength in the symbol of Hibernia as Irish tribes did raid Roman forces in Britain as evidenced by Roman texts from that era (5).

Also in the range of tableware are other characters of historical and political significance. Michael Davitt (1846-1906) also appears in the same format as Parnell. Davitt, a republican and nationalist activist is reflected in the portrait form, with a gaze to his left. The clasped hands of a handshake agreement also appear below his portrait.



Stoke on Trent Teacup and Saucer

Opposite Michael Davitt on the a dinner plate from the range of tableware is Dr. Thomas Croke, (1824-1902) Bishop of Auckland, New Zealand and Archbishop of Cashel and Emily, Ireland. Dr. Croke also an Irish nationalist has his name attached to the home of the Gaelic Athletic Association, Croke Park, Dublin, an 82300-seat sports stadium.

Noting the dates of the demise of each of these individuals in relation to the museum date for the dinner service range- 1888, two of the three individuals were still alive when the dinner service was created so the true nature of the imagery adorning the table service is arguably not

commemorative in nature, but arguably a political celebration or promotion.

4[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hibernia_\(personification\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hibernia_(personification))

5 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hibernia>

and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hiberno-Roman_relations



Stoke on Trent Plate

Within these domestic objects, emblazoned with Irish symbols, the Shamrock, the Harp, the text stating 'Erin go Brach' which can be translated as 'Ireland until the end of time'. Do these objects described here have a very clear agenda beyond domestic function and the purpose of serving food and drink? I would argue, in a very discreet manner, yes they do.

The broader critical landscape of art and craft in Ireland should be considered to locate the discreet and subversive potential the crafts in Ireland had in the 19th and 20th centuries. I am arguing that this is why objects of a high political nature such as the 'Home Rule Teapot' and the "Erin go Brach" tableware could exist within material culture. Consider the overview by Irish Government Minister Justin Keating:

'The whole thrust of our cultural preoccupation was verbal. Remarkable playwrights, novelists, poets, a great focus on the Irish language and on traditional music and song, but concern for material culture was light. The brightest children of the new proprietors of small farms were busy making money in the retail trade, primarily drink, and their grandchildren were rushing to become doctors, lawyers and priests. . . There was no 'William Morris' strand in the National Revolution. The Thirties, Forties and Fifties were a time of terrible pious petty bourgeois respectability, for the craftsman and artist, a period of disaster'. (6)

6. Keating, Justin, in Ireland and the Arts, ed. Tim Pat Coogan, Ireland and the Arts, Namara Press (no date).

The preoccupation and focus of Irish culture was verbal, text based and communicated through voice and song, Keating argues that the preoccupation was not directed towards material culture. That divergent focus created a gap where these subversive objects could slip under the radar and exist as provocative objects, questioning political norms.

These 'Hidden Treasures' are symbols of political change in Ireland and this change has fed directly back into the material arts and crafts through government policy development in the twentieth century.

In 1949 Dr. Thomas Bodkin, then Director of the National Gallery of Ireland in Merrion Square in Dublin was commissioned to write a "Report on the Arts in Ireland" 1949. A direct result of the Report was the establishment of the Arts Council of Ireland in 1951 to promote the arts.

The recommendations of Thomas Bodkin's celebrated 1949 report were to lead chiefly to the establishment of the Arts Council, but also to give a new impetus to the development of the crafts, which began to be revived at the NCA (National College of Art), during the 1950's.

This can be described in the following timeline:

- Report on the Arts in Ireland 1949
- Formation of the Arts Council of Ireland: 1951
- Design Report Published: 1962
- Formation of Ceramics as a taught Course in the National College of Art and Design Dublin: 1964
- Formation of the Crafts Council of Ireland: 1971

Note that Peter Brennan, who established Ring Ceramics Studio and invited John ffrench to be a partner of the studio, was tasked to establish ceramics as a taught course at the National College of Art and design, listed above. Brennan will be considered later.

The Design Report

It is now at this point we must consider the Irish 'Design Report' of 1962. As studio ceramics began to evolve from the 1960's in Ireland, the state became involved. In 1962 the Taoiseach Sean Lemass transferred responsibility for Design to Coras Tractala (CTT), The Irish Export Board. This led to the 'Design in Ireland' Report.

The authors of the report were:

Prof. Gunnar Biilman Peterson, Royal Academy, Copenhagen

Ake Huldt, Swedish Design Centre

Prof. Erik Herlow, Royal Academy, Copenhagen

Kaj Franck, Arabia, Helsinki

Erik Sorenson, architect, Royal Academy of Copenhagen

And they quickly became known as the 'Scandinavian Designers'. Upon arrival in Ireland they quickly noted:

'A Remarkable feature of Irish Life which we noted, even after a few days, is the manner in which today's Irish culture has developed a distinct leaning towards literature, theatre, the spoken word and abstract thinking, rather than creation by hand or machine and the visual arts – the other side of human activity in civilization' (7)

Their findings were published in February 1962; during their time in Ireland in relation to ceramics the Scandinavian Designers visited 6 potteries:

- Shanagarry Pottery
- Ring Ceramic Studio (Peter Brennan)
- Carrigaline Pottery
- Terrybaun, (Gratten Freyer)
- Youghal Pottery
- Arklow Pottery (John ffrench).

Their comments were critical regarding innovation, originality and indigenouness:

'The main criticism of ...Ceramics... was that what was produced was based on bad English production both as regards design and form, decorated with transfers which had been imported from England and elsewhere. The solution was in the training of decorators, casters and printers. They stressed the importance of smaller potteries in design innovation as well as providing opportunities for individual potters to develop their work' (8)

7. The Design Report 1962, commissioned by the Irish Enterprise Board, Coras Tractala

8. The Design Report 1962, commissioned by the Irish Enterprise Board, Coras Tractala

The brief for the Report as requested by the Irish Government was:

- An overall survey of design in Ireland
- Design promotion
- Design education
- The establishment of an Institute for Visual Arts in Ireland.

The focus of the report was to be:

Textile design and printing: Linen, wool, woven textiles, poplin, Donegal Tweed, hand knitwear, carpets.

Glass

Ceramics

Souvenirs

Graphics

Packaging

Stamp Design

Coinage

The Design Report was highly critical of ceramics in Ireland. The Report had high praise for Irish Stamps, coins and textiles. The basis for this praise was in recognition of the use of indigenous themes, symbols and typography, mainly Celtic, which inspired the text, pattern and colour of these stamps coins and textiles.

The report was critical of the making standards of Irish Ceramics. This included the quality of the work made at Arklow Pottery. A direct response I believe to this criticism by Arklow Pottery was to appoint John ffrench to lead Arklow Studio Pottery, establishing his role within Arklow Pottery. This was a very successful model evidenced in the Arabia Factory in Helsinki, Finland, where Kaj Frank, one of the authors of the Design Report, was Head of Design Dept. Arabia Ceramics Factory and Notsjo glass works Finland. Frank was also Art Director of the Finnish School of Industrial Art.



Arklow Studio Pottery Stamp

The Report also made other recommendations parallel to the model of placing artist and designers in industrial settings mentioned above:

‘the managements of the China and Pottery factories should consider setting aside money for development work, eg. The training of casters. The casting at present is poor and unsatisfactory and it would be very easy to raise this standard by sending men to study in Denmark where casting techniques are more highly developed than in England’ (9)

The Report did prompt the Irish Government to invite a number of European artist and crafts people to come to Ireland to establish their studios with the direct intention of training local Irish people with the craft techniques and technologies the visitors had already mastered.

Although generally severely critical the comments of the Designers did lead to reaction from the Irish State:

1 year after the design report was published Peter Brennan was asked to establish the first pottery course at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin. The Kilkenny Design Workshops were established by CTT leading to foreign design experts such as Sonja Landweer (NL) and Rudolf Heitzel (D) coming to Ireland to work with exporters and to train in specialized areas of crafts, which already had a foothold in Ireland.

The Design Report of 1962 laid the foundation for the implementation of Ceramics as a taught course at University level in Ireland. It also prompted Government reaction leading to the development of institutions such as the Crafts Council of Ireland and Kilkenny Design Workshops. It recognized the importance of the balance between the studio potter and the potter working with industry.

I would argue the actions of the Irish government to the Design Report created a different cultural landscape to the one described by Justin Keating earlier. That being a material cultural landscape that generated a creative industry within which Ceramics thrived for many years. This industry is best exemplified by the Kilkenny Design Workshops where all the crafts were represented with Government support to establish studios and small businesses. The Workshops also opened two retail outlets, in Kilkenny and Dublin, to create and supply a market for contemporary Irish Craft.

9. The Design Report 1962, commissioned by the Irish Enterprise Board, Coras Tractala.

The Scandinavian Designers noted:

'At the same time it might be worth while to try to interest Irish Sculptors and Craft Potters who from their professional background have many of the qualities needed to spur on an improvement in shape and design. One Irish Pottery is producing work of a very high quality through having the foresight to introduce a technical advisor from abroad. Their problem is one of marketing and design policy rather than any need of outside help. Original thinking artists with a complete knowledge of production must be put to work-ceramicists who will select the clay, the glaze, and the form of decoration. It is clear that without some radical change in design policy it will be impossible to produce anything but the commonplace'. (10)

We can now consider the plate and stemmed bowl made by John ffrench in a very different light. By 1969 ffrench is based in Arklow Pottery, running Arklow Studio Pottery. This links directly to the focus of the authors of the Design Report:

They stressed the importance of smaller potteries in design innovation as well as providing opportunities for individual potters to develop their work' (11)

This simple piece of ceramics made by ffrench now symbolizes a new focus and direction for craft in Ireland and ceramics in particular. The piece now becomes a symbol of a new Ireland with a rejuvenated focus on design quality, education and management.

We now consider the broader context or reaction to the 1962 Report. We can recognize that the National College of Art and Design had established a taught ceramics degree, John ffrench was in place in Arklow Studio Pottery, European artists such as Sonja Landweer (ceramics) and Rudolf Heitzel (silversmithing and jewellery) were in place in Ireland with established studios and the Castle Yards of Kilkenny castle (now home to the Crafts Council of Ireland and the National Craft Gallery). The yards were teeming with small craft studios and workshops. This all came to pass as a result of the Design Report of 1962.

The Scandinavian Designers still had a concern about ceramics:

'We were very interested in the small potteries in Ireland and visited two of them. Once again it was difficult to generalize, for one was an instance of love and care lavished on a craft and was an example to all connected with the industry. The other had the spirit and courage but we felt lacked professional inspiration and education in artistic fundamentals'. (12)

10. The Design Report 1962, commissioned by the Irish Enterprise Board, Coras Tractala

11. The Design Report 1962, commissioned by the Irish Enterprise Board, Coras Tractala

12. The Design Report 1962, commissioned by the Irish Enterprise Board, Coras Tractala

The Report does not state which potteries they criticize in particular but again the placing of ffrench in Arklow Pottery only a few years after the Report was published is significant as a response to the recommendations of the Report.

I propose that John ffrench is one of the Pioneers of Irish Craft and ceramics in particular. ffrench studied ceramics and print in Dublin and Florence before joining Peter Brennan and Victor Waddington as directors of Ring Ceramic Studios in 1956. A year later ffrench was in India setting up potteries for the Government Design Centre of West Bengal. He was back in Ireland by 1960 and set up Arklow Studio Pottery within Arklow Pottery in Co. Wexford. Here he represents the Scandinavian model of bring the artist/ designer closer to their colleagues in industry, very much as previously mentioned, on the model of the artist in residence (still to this day) in the Arabia factory in Helsinki

There are others who should be recognised. Peter Brennan established Ceramics as a taught course in the National College of Art and Design, Dublin and set up the first ceramics studio in Ireland, known as Ring Ceramics Studio, located in the Bull Ring of the Smethwick's Brewery in Kilkenny city.



Peter Brennan Ceramics

Gratten Freyer set up Terrybawn pottery in the West of Ireland in Co. Mayo and fired its first kiln in 1950. He and his wife Madeline Girardeau sought advice from Bernard Leach about setting up a pottery and began a 2-year apprenticeship with Leach in 1946 in St. Ives, Cornwall, England. Peter Brennan visited Leach for 10 days but makes no reference to meeting Freyer in his archives, however Brennan's wife Helena to this day has a photograph taken by her husband, of Freyer in Leach's Studio, indicating that the 2 were there at the same time.



fig 13. Gratten Freyer, Plate, circa 1950's, slip trailed earthenware, turf firing, diameter 26.7cm.

Gratten Freyer Ceramics

That which begins to emerge here is the beginnings of an indigenous aesthetic that has links to the continuous spiral of the Celtic pattern. The key factor in Celtic symbols and decoration is that the line never breaks. Although not the case with Freyer's plate above depicting the horse, certainly the chevron patterns on the horse's torso do make a reference to Celtic symbols. It is certainly evident in the range of wares displayed by Peter Brennan (black and white photograph) where the continuous link of the Celtic line is evident throughout the patterning.

I would argue that this now begins to define an Irish aesthetic or certainly responds to the criticism of the Design Report that an indigenous aesthetic was lacking in Irish material culture by the time of the Report's publication in 1962.

Returning to the Freyer's blue plate depicting the horse, we can certainly track forward to contemporary Irish Ceramicist, Cormac Boydell, who cites Freyer's ceramics as a major influence on his work.



Cormac Boydell Plate 2013



Greyhounds, Belleek Pottery, 1870.

Moving away from the political and emancipatory nature of afore mentioned objects, reports and events, let us consider a discreet porcelain object, namely a collection of dogs, greyhounds, calmly idling in anticipation of future activity.

What can we learn here? Dated 1870 and made in the Belleek Porcelain factory Co. Fermanagh, Northern Ireland, they tell a different story from the politically driven objects previously discussed. These creatures reflect a different culture. A culture certainly rural, probably gentrified, harking back to the relaxed world of the upper classes. These dogs await their next pursuit, the next race or the next hunt. I would propose that their owners are not facing the challenges and difficulties of the tenant farmers that Davitt, Croke and Parnell represented in the political realm.

Several of the objects discussed in this paper, including the greyhounds have lived through a whole series or indices of events. These pieces have lived and survived through the industrial revolution, the creation of a new independent country, the over throw in part of a colonizing nation,

two world wars and all other major events of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. They are humble objects describing a different time and a different set of values. So what do they remind of us today? What story are they telling?

I propose that these objects remind us of the value of the hand made. They also remind us of the relationships between craft and industry and somehow still measure the touch of the human hand in a world where that seems no longer valued. We are now seeing in contemporary productive design (TonFisk from Finland for example) where the relationship between the made object and its user is becoming more fully integrated. The objects are multi functional and engage the user in the act of pouring, storing and consuming.



Tonfisk range of Ceramics 2012

If we take for example the simple clay pipe molds from Co. Derry/Londonderry and Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland, we see that relationship between the hand made process and the industrial process that still I propose, makes the connection between the hand made object and industrial activity. And that connection is something one will

always be drawn to. It is human nature to make, create and leave a mark, an impression in clay or a foot print in sand.



Pipe Molds, National Museum of Country Life, Co. Mayo, Ireland



Pipe Molds, National Museum of Country Life, Co. Mayo, Ireland

We have become so far removed from this, these simple objects and the tools used to make them still hold value, as they still need the maker, the crafts person or laborer to realize these objects. We see this in French's plate, the Stoke on Trent table service, Brennan's pots and Tonfisk design. That is what unites these objects and creates the

importance I argue for here in this paper. They still need the human hand and the touch of the maker.

The pipe molds, like any of the objects discussed in this paper are redundant without the intervention of the crafts person, artist or laborer. However the pipe molds are unique in one sense compared to other objects discussed here. They are a means to an end. They are the crucial link between the maker and the made. They are not the end product but the end product would never exist without the mold. Therefore they are the crucial component in the making process. In the contemporary context they remind us of the value of the process and the value of the tool, without which the end product would never exist to tell its story.

As stated earlier in this paper, Irish popular culture has had a focus on music, poetry, literature and language. Evaluation and reform in the Crafts, only began in the late 1940's and teaching in the Crafts at University level in the 1960's.

Contemporary artists are beginning to emerge on the international stage following the work of the early pioneers, and the establishment of artists like Deidre McLoughlin and Claire Curneen as real leaders in their practice disciplines.

The Design Report of 1962 laid the foundation for the implementation of Ceramics as a taught course at University level in Ireland. It also prompted Government reaction leading to the development of institutions such as the Crafts Council of Ireland and Kilkenny Design Workshops.

It recognized the importance of the balance between the studio potter and the potter working with industry as exemplified by John ffrench who is discussed here in relation to his role in Arklow Pottery

I would argue it created a different cultural landscape to the one described earlier (by Keating). A material cultural landscape that generated a creative industry within which Ceramics thrived for many years.

The Hidden Treasure of Museum Collections not only offer a snap shot of Irish material culture, they demonstrate the drive to create a new political agenda of independence, they are metaphors for the intention of a emerging nation to develop and improve its design standards in management education and collaboration with industry and act as a living record for that same legacy.

These Museum Treasures not only connect us with the past, they offer a link to the future where the relationship between the bespoke, hand made object and the industrial context can still thrive and exist to offer us a reminder of the value of the hand and the hand made.